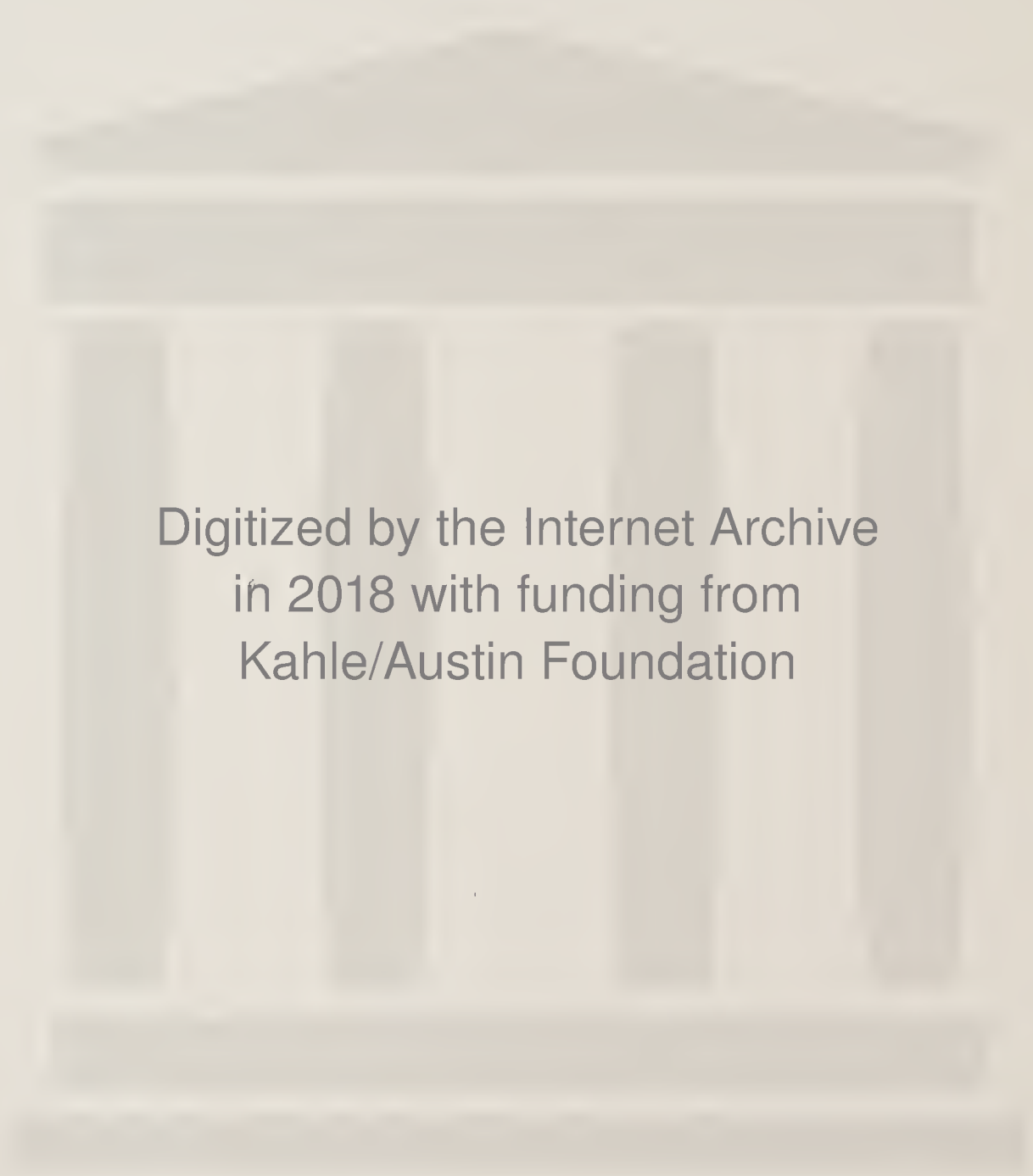


How to Get Out of Vietnam

**“the war we cannot win,
should not wish to win,
are not winning”**

**John Kenneth
Galbraith**

**“The assumed enemy
does not exist”**



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John Kenneth Galbraith, Paul M. Warburg Professor of Economics at Harvard University, has written extensively on foreign policy, knows Asia well, was President Kennedy's ambassador in India, and was described by the President as his best ambassadorial choice. He has been deeply concerned with the Vietnam problem and has emerged as the most articulate spokesman of the Vietnam peace forces in America. He believes there is a new and powerful political constituency in the growing university population of this country. He is not only in touch with the restless and questioning young university students, but with the top academic and government economists and philosophers of the world, making him a politically formidable opponent of current U.S. policy.

Professor Galbraith is National Chairman of Americans for Democratic Action and, of course, the author of *The Affluent Society* and the currently bestselling volume, *The New Industrial State*.

How to Get Out of Vietnam

A workable solution to the worst
problem of our time

John Kenneth Galbraith

A SIGNET BROADSIDE



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1

Our Needs and Those of the Vietnamese

My purpose in this brief book is to outline a practical way out of our unhappy and increasingly disastrous mess in Vietnam. I have been governed, as anyone attempting this formidable task must be, by certain assumptions as to the nature of this war, the stage that it has now reached, and the present state of American public opinion. And I have sought to accommodate the solution to what I judge to be the basic and minimum requirements of the participants, including, in particular, ourselves. Let me first make explicit these requirements.

There are first the needs of the United States. A solution must be either generally acceptable to the people of the United States or one on the merits of which, within a reasonable time, they will be persuaded. This sounds obvious enough; yet, to a remarkable extent, in the discussion of Vietnam it is a requirement that has been ignored. People, perhaps naturally, have urged as the only possible course what seemed most acceptable to themselves. Those who have wanted a military victory have not been impressed by the differing preferences of

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those who think its cost in lives, national reputation, and domestic needs too high or those who question its moral sanction. This independence has been reinforced by important modern tendencies in the conduct of foreign policy. Especially in the Cold War years, we fell into the habit of allowing those who make foreign and military policy a very long leash—far longer than in the case of, say, labor relations or agriculture. Communists were assumed to be notoriously tough people; better leave dealing with them to the experts. This has led, in turn, to marked indifference to public opinion in the State Department and the Pentagon. It is the habit to dismiss outside views as reflecting insufficient information, excessive idealism, or soft-mindedness, or as being merely inconvenient. If the public must be persuaded, one seeks out a few key citizens for an off-the-record briefing or lunch. With others, and especially with those who voice their disagreement, it is a mark of weakness to be too much concerned.

But there has been a counterpart tendency among the critics of the war. As I shall suggest in a moment, it now seems reasonably clear that our involvement in Vietnam was the result of a massive miscalculation—perhaps the [?] worst miscalculation in our history. It is tempting to argue that this error should be corrected simply by reversing the action, as President Kennedy did at the Bay of Pigs (and, it might be added, over the energetic objection of those who sought to extend and reinforce the original mistake by sending in our planes or committing our troops). But, although the supporters of the Vietnam war are almost certainly losing their hold on public opinion, there are still many Americans who are persuaded that we

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fight in a righteous cause or in some sense are “saving” Southeast Asia or even Hawaii. And there are many whose sense of national pride is engaged; they are appalled at the idea of an American “defeat.” Their views cannot be overridden either. Here, too, there is a difference between what can be done and what one might wish to do. In peacemaking as in other matters, the best is the enemy, if not of the good at least of the better.

Any solution must also be acceptable to the South Vietnamese. We are aided here by the recent elections, for it is difficult to read them except as a substantial vote for peace by compromise with the National Liberation Front) which wages the battle in the South) and with the government of North Vietnam in Hanoi. Had the elections been unrigged—had the two most promising opposition candidates, Au Truong Thanh and General (Big) Minh, both supporters of a negotiated solution, not been excluded from the ballot; had neutralists and alleged pro-Communists not been excluded from the polls; had there been no censorship of the press; had the army and the ethnic groups not been pressed to vote *en bloc* for the military candidates—the showing of those favoring peace would almost certainly have been much stronger. Yet there are also some millions of people in that unhappy land who for one reason or another—religious faith, political conviction, political ambition, the eager pursuit of profits, the grim pursuit of the military police—have joined our effort. We cannot simply write them off; even by majority vote we do not assign people to the sanguinary attentions of their enemies. Any solution must take account of the needs of the minority in South Vietnam who fear a take-

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over by the National Liberation Front and its Communist leaders.

Finally, it goes without saying that a solution must be acceptable to the enemy—to the government of North Vietnam or the National Liberation Front. Or if not acceptable, it must be one that can be sustained independently of their agreement. Here it seems to me both critics and friends of the conflict have made their greatest mistake. Many critics have assumed, in effect, that Hanoi and the NLF were under eminently reasonable leadership and that, given the opportunity they would gladly negotiate. Who could fail to oblige Americans and other Westerners of obvious good will? And the proponents of the military solution have assumed an even greater capacity for reasonable calculation. We had only to raise sufficiently the cost of the war by bombing from the air and by search-and-destroy operations on the ground, and the other side would make the appropriate cost-benefit calculation and see the greater advantages of peace. Then they would ask for negotiations. That our policy is to “hurt” the enemy until they see the advantage of suing for peace has been reiterated many times.

In truth, no one knows on what conditions short of our immediate withdrawal that Hanoi and the NLF would negotiate. Our own terms could not easily be judged from the past speeches of the President or the Secretary of State. Hanoi statements may be no more incisive as a guide. A practical solution must, accordingly, be one that, in the greatest possible measure, is independent of the reaction of Hanoi and the NLF. It must not be inconsistent with their favorable response; if that should come, well and good. But it must depend on a favorable response just as

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little as possible. This greatly complicates policy-making. But it also secures us from the disagreeable prospect of coming up with an eminently reasonable proposal which Hanoi then dismisses as a filthy imperialist trick. From these requirements of a solution I turn to my assumptions as to the kind of war we fight and the point it has reached. Thereafter I will consider the present state of American public opinion.

2

The Original Reason for Involvement

We went into the war in Vietnam in response to a view of the world which was then deeply graven as official truth and which has turned out to be sharply in conflict with circumstance. This is one piece of history on which there is no real difference of opinion. In its original conception, we were responding in Vietnam to a probe by a centrally directed Communist conspiracy—to what Secretary of State Dean Rusk many times described as “the central issue” of the crisis of our time, namely:

. . . the announced determination to impose a world of coercion upon those not already subject to it . . . it is [an issue] posed between the Sino-Soviet empire and all the rest, whether allied or neutral; and it is posed on every continent . . .¹

We would not have felt threatened by national communism in Vietnam—by communism that was independent of ties to Peking or Moscow. For some fifteen years we

¹ *Winds of Freedom* by Dean Rusk (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1962), p. 16.

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had supported Marshal Tito's national communism in Yugoslavia; in the most elementary view of the world scene, it is something with which we now must live. Nor do we react whenever an existing government, parliamentary or otherwise, is threatened by insurrection—not even when the latter is encouraged and supported from outside. If we did, much of the Middle East, for example, would now be an American garrison, for Radio Cairo has been inciting revolt in various countries there for years and the government of the U.A.R. has given help to numerous dissidents in other Arab lands. We would not have selected Vietnam as opposed to, say, Greece as a place to defend personal liberty and parliamentary government.

It was the centrally guided, conspiratorial aspect of communism by which we felt threatened and by which we felt Southeast Asia to be threatened. China was an intermediate link in this conspiracy; Secretary Rusk once described her as “a colonial Russian government—a Slavic Manchukuo” subject, he told a Congressional Committee in the early years of the Kennedy Administration, to “direct subservience to the policies of the [Sino-Soviet] bloc as conceived in Moscow.”² Hanoi, and beyond that the Viet Cong, were the ultimate extension of this centrally guided, imperial force. To blunt the thrust of this empire we came militarily to the support of Ngo Diem Dinh and his successors.

Since we took this decision the whole foundation on which it rested has collapsed. Relations between China and the Soviets have been ruptured; they only perilously maintain diplomatic relations and have ceased even to be

² Quoted in *The New Republic*, October 26, 1966.

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polite in their communication with each other. That they are working in conspiratorial concert is now no more plausible than that we are in an imperialist conspiracy with General de Gaulle. The Secretary of State has conceded the point by making the ultimate enemy successively Moscow, Peking, Hanoi itself, and lately in some part Peking again.³ But the shift to Hanoi is no geographical detail; it concedes that we are concerned not with something directed from the center but something under local command. If the ultimate direction of the war is in Vietnam, we are concerned, in short, with national communism. Instead of the original enemy, we face one that elsewhere we not only tolerate but encourage.

Indeed, were the circumstances less tragic, one would find himself sympathizing with those who must defend this conflict in the face of this change. The enemy coalition—the empire—against which our operation was launched turned out not to exist. This cannot have happened very often in history. And devising an alternative rationale has involved the Administration in a maze of contradictions through which no lawyer could now make his way. We could not justify intervention in order to put

³ In an article, "The Central Purpose of United States Foreign Policy," (*The Department of State Bulletin*, August 28, 1967), the Secretary said of the Vietnam conflict, "Our men are there because of aggression from the North, and in accordance with a treaty commitment approved by the United States Senate with only one negative vote." Subsequently, at a news conference on October 12, the Secretary again defended the war as necessary to stem the outward thrust of a billion Chinese armed with nuclear weapons. This caused him, rather unfairly I think, to be charged with seeking to revive the specter of the yellow peril. Those who most strongly criticize the rigid and stereotyped news of the Secretary, and their danger when applied to the modern reality, do not believe him a racist.

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down a purely local insurrection; there are too many of these in the world, and the governments we defended in Saigon were far from popular. It was held, accordingly, that we were resisting foreign aggression in South Vietnam. But this had the difficulty, as Hanoi became the ultimate enemy, that it was not foreign aggression by a foreign country but by the other half of the same country. It was also the half in which most of the leaders of the part we defended were born. And it was the half that was supposed to have been united by nationwide elections with our half under the terms of the Geneva accords of 1954—the agreement which brought to an end the efforts at colonial dominion by the French. (The government we supported was the one that refused to have the elections.) Further, if the foreign intervention by the nonforeigners was decisive, the role of the domestic opposition had to be unimportant. But important areas of South Vietnam, including much of the Mekong Delta, have always been controlled by purely local forces. No units from North Vietnam have ever been identified. All of this has led to the temptation to reintroduce the notion of a larger aggressor—a country which, unlike Vietnam, poses a threat worthy of the concern of the United States. But this poses worse problems. A recent State Department publication *Viet-Nam in Brief*, warns ominously that Vietnam is “the principal testing ground chosen by today’s aggressors to try out the new strategy of aggression: so-called ‘wars of national liberation.’ ” But the article cannot name Moscow as the ultimate aggressor for it is at odds with Peking, and the latter is closer. And Peking cannot be named because Hanoi gets more help from Moscow. So the pamphlet must remain silent on the identity of the aggressors,

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and it does. To defend a war in which one cannot name the enemy also cannot have happened often before. Truth is inconvenient, but simpler.

Had the original conception of the conflict been valid, our military pressure against the Viet Cong in the rice paddies and jungles of South Vietnam would have been, in effect, a confrontation through proxy with Peking and Moscow. Perhaps we have all been saved because this was a miscalculation; otherwise, by now our intervention would have brought the Communist coalition actively into the line on the other side along with their weapons. And a great imperial war would have been the result, with consequences that are unpleasant to contemplate. But another line of calculation is possible, and it is one that, without doubt, played a greater role in State Department strategy. Given the original assumption, it followed that Moscow (or even Peking) was in full control of the action in Vietnam. At some stage these powers would sense our determination to stand firm and so would call off the effort.

It is now agreed—indeed it has been repeatedly conceded by the Secretary of State—that neither Moscow nor Peking has the power to call off the conflict. But this again is to concede that Hanoi and the National Liberation Front are an independent Vietnamese power. They are an expression not of some ultimate reach of world communism but of Vietnamese national aspiration. The consequences of this, which are of the utmost importance for our future action, must now be examined.

3

The Nature of a War with Nationalism

In the conspiratorial vision of world communism that developed following World War II, one thing was axiomatic. Communism outside the Soviet Union could never successfully identify itself with nationalism. It was a foreign as well as a wicked thing which no country would have except as it might be imposed or infiltrated from abroad. Communists could never be patriots.

In American foreign policy one must always distinguish between the respectable and the informed view. That communism was a wicked intrusion without domestic roots was the respectable view. But it had a deep hold on the older officials, and it also made a measure of sense in Europe and the United States. Italian, French, and American Communists were known to have a higher loyalty to Moscow. In consequence, their patriotism was suspect. In an age of strong national feeling, this was a serious and even a fatal handicap. Those older statesmen who support the Vietnam war—the distinguished senior group which recently formed the Citizens Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam, for example—are mostly

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men who formed their views of communism on the basis of the European experience during the Truman and Eisenhower years and have not revised them to reflect the Asian experience or, in some cases, even the disintegration of the Communist world.

For what was true in Europe was not true in Asia. In China we now know the Communists seized the banners of Chinese nationalism which is a principal reason why they came into conflict with Moscow. And it must now be assumed that they have done the same thing in Vietnam, both north and south. They strongly avow the cause of Vietnam nationhood, of Vietnamese identity. They offer a home for non-Communists of similar nationalist passion. Nor is this view wholly at odds with past Administration thinking. Walt W. Rostow, President Johnson's principal advisor on national security, has called the tendency of the Communists to become a patriotic force the "slow-moving but great historical crisis" of modern communism. As he describes it:

This crisis takes the form of the deep dispute between Moscow and Peiping—a dispute which has engaged, in one way or another, Communist parties throughout the world. What lies behind this dispute, among other factors, is the rise of nationalism as a living and growing force within the Communist bloc.

And with what could easily be read as a plea for our support not of Saigon but Hanoi and the Viet Cong, he continues:

The drive for independence is a most powerful force. We can honestly align our policy with this force. In the end

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the Communists cannot, and this is one fundamental reason why the Communist offensive in the underdeveloped areas will fail.¹

At the same time there can be little question that the trend has been, if anything, in the opposite direction in Saigon. In conjunction with ourselves that government has come ever less to seem the patriotic force. It inherited the bureaucracy and habits of government that were associated with French colonial rule. It is supported by the traders, landlords, and profiteers who flourished also under the French. Numerous of its officials are not patriotic, simply corrupt. The generals who have dominated the government in these last years were trained by the French, and some fought for the French. Those who defeated the French are almost all on the other side. In a dispatch on August 7 in *The New York Times*, R. W. Apple, Jr. noted that:

Thousands of men who might be leading South Vietnamese troops in combat are serving with the North Vietnamese or the Vietcong, heirs to the country's nationalist revolution against the French. Of all the government officers serving as lieutenant colonel or higher, only two fought on the side of the Vietminh in the war against the French.

Our presence in the conflict, whatever our intention, further weakens the nationalist identification of the gov-

¹ *View from the Seventh Floor* by W. W. Rostow (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 31. (However, I do not wish to identify Mr. Rostow unfairly with the dissenters. He goes on to argue that these are long-run changes which need not necessarily affect short-run developments.)

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ernment in Saigon. It is not that we are white and the Vietnamese a mild ivory. In point of fact our forces are, in striking degree, black. But we are a Western power; Westerners everywhere in Asia are associated with the most antinationalist of all phenomena, which is colonialism. And what is called the American presence—the jeeps, trucks, military headquarters, barracks, houses, P.X.'s, big men with small women—wherever it appears in the world is a truly awesome thing. It makes earlier British or French colonialism seem almost subtle by contrast.

So, to repeat, it is a reasonable, indeed an inescapable, assumption that we are in conflict not alone with the Communists but with a strong sense of Vietnamese nationalism. If so, a further and massive conclusion follows. It is that we are in a war that we cannot win and, even more important, one we should not wish to win.

For few lessons are so sharply etched by history as the helplessness of Western powers in dealing with the nationalist reaction to colonial rule. It matters little how weak the opposition is. The British with a monopoly of military force could not keep themselves in India once the opposition had captured the patriotic sentiment of the people. They were forced out by an unarmed mass in *dhotis* led by a little man in a loincloth. Their experience with a similar monopoly of force was the same in Africa. That of the French was the same in sub-Sahara Africa and Tunisia and Morocco. And, although they had a vast advantage in military power and chose to consider the country a part of France, the experience was the same in Algeria. And the Belgians did not deem it wise to remain in the Belgian Congo although not more than two dozen of those who opposed them had the equivalent of a college

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education and none had held a military rank as high as lieutenant. And the Dutch could not remain in Indonesia although they faced a people, as we have since seen, with a near genius for anarchy. And the French could not stay in Vietnam.

And in an earlier and possibly wiser period in our own history we sensed that we could not resist the rising national sentiment of the Philippines. With some help from the sugar lobby we withdrew and proudly noted that we were the first of the colonial nations to learn that the power of rising nationalism could not be resisted. This is the lesson of history, unmarked by any exceptions, unless it be that of the Portuguese, that we are seeking to prove wrong in Vietnam. That the Communists, with others, carry the banners of nationalism does not change the essential nature of the problem. Elsewhere, also with some exceptions, they have ranged themselves on the nationalist side. It remains a war that Western countries cannot win and do not seek to win.

There seems little doubt that our military achievements are as limited as the above would lead us to expect. Our military technology is vastly superior. The courage of our soldiers seems not to be in question. One judges that in the last year or so a few more roads have become secure; so also a few villages. But the essential military situation remains unchanged. Our relative advantage in numbers, weapons, or morale has not increased. The Saigon government controls the cities and, in some degree, a couple of thousand of the 12,500 hamlets. The rest of the country, especially after nightfall, remains under the control of the enemy as it has for many years. The secondhand assessment by civilians of military matters is not highly re-

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garded. But I would be surprised if many military men would now come forward to argue for a greatly more sanguine view. We are not finding our war more winnable than, in the similar situation, did the British, French, Belgians, or Dutch. And as they did, we are finding that an increasing number of our own people do not wish to win it. Here, as there, we find the equivalent of Tory opinion defending our need to remain. Here, as there, it is a diminishing force. It is interesting, also, that the modern American stand-patter, like his Tory antecedent, complains that those who face reality are unpatriotic. They encourage the enemy. The complaint should not deter anyone. It is the price, a small one, of rescuing those who made this miscalculation from their error.

4

The Trend of Public Opinion

For I next assume that public opinion in the United States has turned very strongly against the war—and especially against those who hope to bring it to a military solution. The public opinion polls show it. So do the altered stands of political and other leaders—Senators Frank Lausche, Thruston Morton, Clifford Case, by gradual movement George Romney, numerous Congressmen of both parties, the Republican governors, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, and, conceivably one day soon, since he has never shown any quixotic tendency to stand on principle against the publicly expressed preference of the voters, Richard Nixon. But the forces underlying this change—the dynamics of public persuasion—seem to me even more significant.

Let me review these. In the past, at least since 1815, wars in the United States have been fought in accordance with a unanimity rule. Sound the drums and almost everyone fell in step. In the early stages of our involvement in Vietnam the Administration benefited strongly from this

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automatic majority. People reacted as they were expected to react to war. Cautious and traditional as always, most politicians could not imagine any other behavior and went along with the Administration. But there was a saving remnant. From the beginning the war was opposed by the articulate part of the student population, by an equally articulate part of the teaching and scientific community, by a large number of writers, by a handful of very effective Senators, by the majority of religious leaders, by a considerable sprinkling of the more concerned and motivated citizenry, and by the most influential of the newspapers. The opponents, with many exceptions, were those with the greatest depth of feeling and the greatest power to persuade. Supporting the war, with many exceptions, were those who responded out of habit or tradition. Given this alignment of forces, and even allowing the Administration its advantage in immediate access to press, radio, and television, it was in a losing battle for the public mind. The supporters of the war rightly said that the opposition included the noisiest part of the population. This, however, was a fatal advantage.

The defense of the conflict suffers from two other handicaps. One is the inordinately obdurate nature of fact. The Administration's case was grounded, we have seen, not on reality but on a false image. It has been plagued, accordingly, by a constant conflict between what it has said exists and what, in the immutable course of history, has been shown to exist. I do not join here in the charges of general deliberate deception. The greater misfortune of the Administration has been that of anyone whose beliefs—or wishes—are drastically at odds with circumstance.

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Circumstance then keeps tripping you up. Critics of the Vietnam conflict have been occasionally inclined to self-pity. We have spent a great deal of time reflecting on our heroism and our inability to persuade the Administration of the unwisdom of its course. We have not reflected on the terrible treatment which history has been according the friends of this conflict. Rarely, if ever, have men been made to look more ridiculous. Consider the misfortunes created by conflicting circumstance only in part.

- If a limited number of Communists with no national roots were our enemy, it would be reasonable to expect their early defeat and liquidation. This, accordingly, was predicted. "The reports of progress," as Senator Mansfield has said, "are strewn like burned-out tanks all along the road which has led [us] ever more deeply into Vietnam." And after each report of progress the American people learned that, in effect, nothing had been changed. The progress, if real, was invisible. The roots of the opposition, all too evidently, went far deeper. This sequence had a poor effect on public confidence.

- Were the enemy without national roots, their extirpation and defeat would not require a vast effort. So, at similar intervals, it has seemed reasonable to promise that a few more men would bring victory. Time has then passed and the victory has not come. Instead there has been a call for more men. This too has had a poor effect on public opinion.

- Were the enemy making a calculated probe, as initially assumed, they could be expected to react in calculable fashion to bombing—step up the blows and these

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would bring them to the bargaining table. This has been repeatedly promised. But if the enemy were the custodian of patriotic sentiment, resistance might more plausibly be stiffened. And it has. And now the public has Secretary Robert McNamara's courageous conclusion that bombing will not make the enemy negotiate. This sequence has not added to public confidence.

- Ever since 1960, programs for insuring security in the countryside have been proclaimed, beginning with the strategic hamlet program of Ngo Diem Dinh. With each of these, success has only been six months or a year distant. Were the problem only Communist banditry and terror, this expectation would not have been unreasonable. But if the Viet Cong has a deep hold on the countryside, this expectation is unreasonable. The opposition will be everywhere, and everywhere it will find protection. And this has been the experience. The future has arrived but not the success, and not once but many times. Of the 12,500 hamlets in South Vietnam, *The New York Times* reported on August 7 of this year that only about 2,000 were sufficiently secure so that the village chief thought it prudent to spend the night there. After night-fall in the rest, the pacification program makes its own peace with the Viet Cong. Only 168 of the 12,500 hamlets were listed by our people as completely secure. This experience has hardly been reassuring. No promises about the prospect for pacification will now be taken seriously.

- Once it was a major point in defense of our involvement that we were only advising and supporting the South Vietnamese army. They fought as patriots might be expected to fight for their own country; our soldiers

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only helped these valiant men. This too would be reasonable were they the national force. Since then it has been necessary for Americans to take over most of the fighting, to take casualties in excess of the South Vietnamese draft calls. Nothing could be better designed to reduce confidence in the Vietnamese Army as an efficient and patriotic force.

- Given these shortcomings, improvements had to be promised. So from month to month the American people and all visiting correspondents have been told that the South Vietnamese army was on its way to becoming a great fighting force. In 1961 President Kennedy was urged by General Maxwell Taylor and Walt W. Rostow to send a division of combat troops to South Vietnam. The President asked me to go to Saigon to submit a second and distinctly nonprofessional judgment. I was strongly assured then that the need for our help would be temporary; that the Vietnamese army, given a little time, would become a fine fighting force. There have been many more promises since. And to this day the morale and efficiency of this army, a certain ingenuity in avoiding combat apart, remains well below the Egyptian minimum. This has been damaging to the confidence of the public in those who must defend the war.

- If we are defending liberty in South Vietnam, the government must have some of the attributes of democracy as Americans understand it. A military junta fits badly into the picture. Accordingly, it was necessary to promise that there would be a constitution and free elections. The result would not be Jeffersonian, but neither, it is said, is Mississippi. The constitution was drafted; the elections were held. As noted, the dangerous

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contenders were excluded by the military junta from contention. The press was censored, although this the constitution forbade. Opposition candidates were encouraged by the military in order to divide the vote. A run-off was denied, although there is one in Mississippi. Ethnic blocs and the army were mobilized on behalf of the generals. They got only about a third of the vote, and even the Vietnamese, whose standards can hardly be rigorous, came close to voiding the results as fraudulent. This added to the conviction that we are supporting an undemocratic as well as an unpopular regime. Americans have a special instinct for the rigged election.

- Finally, this being a small war with Communist intruders, its defenders held that it would not cost us the support of our friends or require that we forego urgent social tasks here at home. Since then it has cost us heavily in friendship and respect the world around. Few would now doubt that, in this regard, it has been a disaster. And it has set severe limits on spending on behalf of the urban ghettos, the poor, and the educationally disadvantaged in the United States. Just ahead is a serious problem of inflation. This too has undermined confidence in those who defend the war. The American people have come to see that the war the Vietnamese do not especially want we can afford. And what Americans desperately need we must postpone.

The consequence of this ghastly sequence of promise and disappointment is that now nearly everything that is said in defense of the war is suspect. This, in turn, nullifies the natural advantage of the Administration in access to press and television. There isn't much advantage

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in being able to get your side before the people if they no longer believe what you say or do not listen.

Those who must defend the war have a second and potentially even more serious handicap than this conflict between promise and circumstance. Increasingly, as the base of support narrows, the case for the war is made by conservative Republicans, conservative Democrats, or high members of the military services. (Even within the Administration itself support is far from universal.) The defenders have a strong base in the Armed Services Committees of the two houses of Congress, both of which are headed by conservative supporters of the war. So the tactical position is strong; Congressional action can be obtained or blocked as required. But John Stennis, Everett McKinley Dirksen, Mendel Rivers, and the Joint Chiefs do not electrify the country. On the contrary, theirs is a combination that can only repel public support. The Armed Services will themselves one day realize with sorrow that one of the costs of the Vietnam war has been the widespread alienation of public opinion on which they too depend.

Critics of the Vietnam conflict have shown a certain capacity for alienating friends and encouraging opposition. Like all who believe deeply in a cause, they have enjoyed quarreling with those who believe deeply in different methods for achieving the same goal. Numerous of the attacks on the President have been in poor taste. Some dissenters may not have exhausted their ability to spoil their case by resorting to violence. But I would judge, nonetheless, that the chance to persuade the people on the merits of the Vietnam war is now irrevocably lost. If so,

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it is now a war that we cannot win, should not wish to win, are not winning, and which our people do not support. Obviously, some new line of action is called for. What do we do? Let me put the immediate requirements in the form of a series of numbered steps.

5

The Immediate Steps

1. The first step toward a solution of the Vietnam problem is to change our objectives in that country so that they are in accord with the character of the conflict as we are now able to see it. This is even more important than revising our military operations in the area, including the stopping of the bombing. For once we revise our objectives so that they make sense, the appropriate revision of our military operations becomes obvious.

Until now, the accepted aim of our effort has been to restore the authority of the Saigon government in all of South Vietnam. Even given the earlier simplistic view of the conflict as a unified Communist conspiracy, this was a dubious objective. In much of the country the Viet Cong has been the effective governing authority for ten years or more. In a large section of the Delta the Saigon government never had power. The Viet Cong, as we have come to call it, was in control before 1954 and simply retained its power. Even at the peak of the Cold War evangelism in the days of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, we never seriously contemplated rolling back the Com-

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munists from the parts of Europe where they were in power, even though it is a reasonable guess that they were there rather less popular with the people than in Vietnam. We are today untroubled by the control of much of Laos by the Communist-dominated Pathet Lao. So it was quixotic to believe we had an obligation to eliminate Communist power in all South Vietnam in order to restore the dubious authority of Saigon.

But now the older, stereotyped vision of the Communist threat has dissolved. Now we see that we oppose not a Soviet- or Chinese-dominated imperialism but an indigenously motivated nationalism led by Communists or in which Communists have a dominant role. This being so, the goal of restoring Saigon authority in all the country becomes (and here I choose my words deliberately) quite ridiculous. The people do not want such "liberation"—anyone who has read Jonathan Schell's compelling account of the liberation of Ben Suc¹ can only suppose that for them it is stark tragedy relieved only by the calm with which they endure indignity and suffering. The effort runs counter to our own past support for nationalist aspiration. It also runs counter to our knowledge of the handicaps of governments which have a colonial taint. And needless to say, it means that we cannot expect any real help from the Vietnamese army. No force can be conscripted to oppose the nationalist instinct of its own people, and all experience with the South Vietnamese army is consistent with this expectation. Why should we insist on doing what the people do not want and their army cannot be made to do?

¹ *The Village of Ben Suc* by Jonathan Schell (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1967).

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In Vietnam, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, much of the effective power of government is in the village—it is obedience to its unwritten code of behavior and manners that governs the relation of the individual to the society. The authority of central governments is everywhere weak and exiguous. So it matters rather less than in Europe or the United States who controls the central government. But, be this as it may, in most of rural South Vietnam we must expect that such central authority as there is will henceforth be exercised by the Viet Cong. Where it is in control we must accept that it should remain in control. This is not something we concede by negotiation. It is something we accept as clear consequence of the facts as we now see them.

2. Accompanying the revision of goals, and as a result of it, must go the appropriate adjustments of our military operations. Their objectives until now have been to break the grip of the Viet Cong on the countryside and so to hurt the enemy that he will ask for negotiations. The first purpose will now be abandoned. We have already seen that, given the capture of the patriotic instinct by the enemy, the second is hopeless. The purpose of military operations henceforth will be to secure the safety of our own forces and that of the Vietnamese who depend on us. This means that we stop bombing north of the parallel. It means also that we withdraw from exposed positions in South Vietnam and do so permanently. It means further that we stop the bombardment of suspected centers of Viet Cong concentration or command in the South and the costly search-and-destroy operations designed to eliminate this power. If we concede the continuing authority of the NLF in the areas it controls, there is no need to waste

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lives and treasure in an attack on that power. There is no need to subject the people to the cruel suffering that this involves.

One related proposal, often offered by those concerned about the war, is a potential trap for the unwary. That is the suggestion that we have a bombing pause, perhaps an extended one, to test the willingness of the opposition to negotiate. It is often implicit, and sometimes explicit, in this suggestion that should Hanoi refuse to negotiate, we would then be morally justified in bombing as fiercely as our technology allows any targets that remain available.

If it is with national passion that we are engaged, there is little hope that such a pause would bring fruitful negotiations. The avid nationalist would see such negotiation as an invitation to surrender. And this would certainly be so if it is assumed—as we have assumed in the past—that in any settlement the NLF would have to give over to Saigon control over the great areas of South Vietnam which have been subject to its authority for so many years.²

A bombing pause could thus be a way by which those who believe in a military solution could seek to demonstrate that there is no other.

3. The next step is to put ourselves in a position to negotiate. Our first need from negotiations is a cease-fire. It will be said that to abandon the objective of total reconquest is to cast away some of our bargaining power. This is doubtful; the NLF must, by now, be aware of its

² Secretary Rusk said many times in earlier years that Hanoi could have negotiations whenever it “quit what it was doing” in South Vietnam. But since all NLF control was regarded as an intrusion, this meant giving up the areas it controlled. So the Secretary’s statements, if they were taken seriously, must have been taken to require virtual surrender as a condition of negotiation.

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ability to keep us from achieving this objective. We are not giving up anything we have or will have. And in conceding the enemy control of the highly unappealing real estate they now possess, we create one of the basic conditions for negotiation, which is continued existence. No one with any alternatives will go to a bargaining table to discuss his own elimination. So I would conclude that we have a good chance for negotiation at this stage. But if the solution is to be certain, it cannot depend on it.

The more important preparatory problem is our own. The policy here outlined, and the negotiations for which one would hope at this stage, cannot be initiated or conducted by men who believe in a military solution. In the future, as in the past, such men will always find any revision of our objectives impractical and any proposal for negotiation from the other side unconvincing. Where nations are at military odds, suggestions for negotiation will always be put forward cautiously. If one does not want to hear them, one does not need to hear them. Further, if one does not wish to negotiate, he can always do so in a manner that insures failure. "To change a policy," General Marshall used to say, "you must change the men."

An example is worth citing. The very tedious negotiations over Laos in 1961 were an imperfect but still a highly useful step toward peace in that country. They were so only because Averell Harriman, who led the American delegation, believed deeply in a compromise solution and was willing to stake his whole reputation on the outcome. Once when he was absent from Geneva for a few days, his deputy, a distinguished Foreign Service officer, who, however, was far from being similarly com-

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mitted, made a strident Cold War speech assaulting the Chinese and Russians hip and thigh. In Harriman's view, this one speech set agreement back appreciably. Certainly if this officer had been in charge, there would have been no agreement at all.

4. Next, we must reckon with the possibility that, having taken the foregoing steps, and having attracted the very considerable moral support that world opinion will then provide, the Viet Cong and Hanoi will not play. If we assume nationalist passion, we must assume the consequences. A little more pressure, the opposition may hope, will drive the foreigners out. No cease-fire will be agreed upon. This brings us to the minimum requirement of the South Vietnamese, which is that we provide a place of decent refuge for those who have joined our enterprise in Vietnam. And it brings us to the fears of many of our own people—fears that I do not myself share but which I am required by my rules to respect—of the consequences elsewhere in Asia of simply pulling out.

To meet these requirements of the Vietnamese and of our own people, we must be prepared to defend for the time being the limited areas that are now secure and that are reasonably subject to such defense. These will be mostly the larger cities, and I would distinguish this course of action from that of the so-called enclave policy. It implies active patrolling to keep the enemy beyond mortar range. It means vigilant policing to maintain security within the defended areas. It is the policy to which, it would appear, we went over almost automatically when it was necessary to provide security for the recent elections.

This course cannot be pursued without casualties. And it will encounter military objection. But no one can sup-

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pose that the casualties will be more than a fraction of those from redeeming the whole of South Vietnam. And all experienced bureaucrats (of whom I am one) know that military leaders always describe as impossible what they do not want to do. Since many are committed to the military redemption of all of South Vietnam (and since modern Air Force doctrine evidently sanctions the use of air power for any purpose effective or ineffective, useful or disastrous), some and perhaps most military men will naturally urge the military unfeasibility of action which serves these new goals. No one should be persuaded; it is for issues such as this that we lodge ultimate power in civilian hands. For if 500,000 Americans, together with the 600,000 leisurely men of the ARVN (Army of Vietnam) can eventually reconquer and pacify the whole country, they can hold a few cities against an enemy armed (after our withdrawal south) only or mainly with light infantry weapons. To say that such defense is impossible is to contend that our military forces are capable only of attack and conquest—even when the latter is even more palpably unfeasible. Had we only a few thousand soldiers in the area, the option here outlined would not be open. One of the few advantages of the buildup in these past years is that we now have this choice.

Nor need we waste time on the superficially sophisticated argument that the American people will not stand for such a passive policy. The American people are reasonable in these matters; they have learned not to insist on perfection. In 1953, all self-approving pundits would have warned that they would never accept a fifteen-year armistice in Korea calling for the continued and heavy commitment of American troops. They did accept precisely that

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and were so manifestly grateful to President Eisenhower for the solution that they reelected him with nearly unprecedented enthusiasm in 1956. People are far more likely to accept a solution that moves in the right direction than one that continues in the wrong path. It has been wrong so long and so alarmingly that even a modestly right one will seem superb.

5. I have so far avoided using the word de-escalation, but it can be applied to the next step: This is a drastic scaling down of the rhetoric we employ in discussing Vietnam. This will be helped by the steps so far. Without the bombing, without the search-and-destroy operations, with fewer casualties and lessened cost, Vietnam will fade in the news. On some days it will be back with the truss ads. But Washington also has a role to play here. Were we countering a calculated probe by a unified Communist conspiracy—were the stereotyped view still valid—one might still wonder if the defense of an unpopular and inefficient military government in Saigon was decisive for the liberties of all mankind. Both the White House and the State Department would show more respect for the taste and intelligence of the American people if they resorted on occasion to understatement. But if we are involved in Vietnam with national communism in which the nationalist element is strong, and if we concede it has long controlled much of South Vietnam, then nothing more is involved here than the continued existence of Marshal Tito in Europe. We not only tolerate Tito but support him. So there is not the slightest reason to suppose that Saigon is where the future of human liberty is being decided. Those who so assert do not persuade. Rather by their words they limit their own freedom of action, for

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their own exaggeration is cited against them when they wish to change course. In any case, neither election nor appointment to high office qualifies a man to make cosmic judgments on the future of all mankind. In the United States, Presidents are elected and Secretaries of State are appointed to be executives and administrators and not sources of divine revelation.

Of all the reasons for not changing course, the fact that the individuals involved are overcommitted by their past error—that they are defending their personal reputation—is the worst. It is probably now the most important.

These several immediate actions, all of which are within our own power of decision, take us some way. They reduce the war from a major and growing and increasingly dangerous involvement, with the further threat of a land war with China or an annihilating nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union, to something substantially more than an irritation. What are the more distant steps?

6

The Further Steps

In all life, one's later course depends on one's earlier opportunities and choices. So it is in diplomacy; so it will be in working our way out of the Vietnam morass. But, depending on the response to the steps just mentioned, the further steps are also reasonably clear.

Once the subjugation of all South Vietnam ceases to be our goal, we will no longer have to support military governments in Saigon. These were needed only for a campaign of reconquest; they are not needed for a holding operation in which the door is open for negotiation. Instead, a government that favors negotiation can have our support. There seems little doubt that such a government would also find a considerably broader base among the people than that of Thieu and Ky.

During the recent election campaign, even General Thieu felt obliged to make overtures to the idea of negotiation, and thereafter at his inauguration. At an earlier stage, Ambassador Lodge was often quoted by visitors as saying that *any* civilian government in Saigon would "be on the phone" to Hanoi immediately on taking office, and

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since he has some trouble recalling his informal or off-the-record remarks, he should search his memory before denying this. So if negotiation and a cease-fire do not materialize when we change our military goals, there is a reasonable chance that they can be arranged later between the Vietnamese. Such negotiation adds to our hope for compromise arrangements which secure the safety and well-being of those who have joined us and which will allow our full withdrawal.

Alternatively or additionally, at this later stage we should seek a reconvening of the Geneva Conference—of the implementing body of the 1954 settlement in Vietnam. Our position in seeking such a conference will be very strong; no country can legitimately question our intentions in Vietnam after the revision of our goals and military operations. This, if it has not previously occurred, will be another chance to get a final cease-fire. The further and principal task of such a conference would be to define the terms under which the two groups of Vietnamese can live in reasonable tolerance and harmony, and with suitable guarantee that these will continue. One thinks as a possibility of some kind of autonomous region or zone around Saigon, and perhaps elsewhere, made secure by an international presence. But simpler solutions may be possible. Were life under the NLF now intolerable, it is hard to imagine that so many would fight for it so stubbornly. Perhaps the Vietnamese, given the chance, would simply prefer to risk the perils of peace and co-existence. Our vision of communism is considerably more alarming than theirs. And, needless to say, we should be prepared to grant asylum, along with free passage and

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help in rehabilitation, to any Vietnamese who feel threatened in their native land.

When our negotiations, those of the Vietnamese or those under the Geneva Conference allow, we should finally and fully withdraw. It would not be difficult, one imagines, to get the commitment of an American delegation and government rather sharply circumscribing our right to return to this particular country.

I have said that I do not take seriously the menace of the falling dominoes. Chinese imperialism in this area is understood and even less well regarded than that of the French. This the Chinese unquestionably know. To put this part of the world under Chinese rule would be to shift the struggle we cannot win to them. And, as Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has cogently observed, were it a threat, no recent administration in Saigon would be much of a bastion against a billion Chinese moving south. It is true enough that journalists, members of Congress, American officials, and even tourists traveling in Asia have often heard, usually in strict confidence, how important our continued presence is for this purpose. They hear this because Asian politicians are adept, as all familiar with the area should know, in telling Americans precisely what they think we want to hear. We usually hear it in confidence because few Asian politicians wish to seem to be aligned against Asian nationalism. So in public they say we should settle and get out. But I am seeking to allow for all eventualities, including the possibility that I am wrong. Should our continued presence be necessary, the course I here propose will accord us a foothold for a time and thus allow us a second look.

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None of this is very dramatic. The logic of outright withdrawal is doubtless more compelling, and it is certainly more cathartic for the person who avows it. But I must remind the reader of my purpose. It was to outline the course of action that would work—that would meet the requirements of the largest number of people concerned, including the largest possible number of Americans, and would not depend on a favorable reaction by the opposition.

Let me stress three other points. A country can change course and correct miscalculations without damage to its prestige. We did in Cuba in 1961. So, a year and a half later, did the Soviets. The British, French, Dutch, and Belgians all once intended to remain in their dependent states and fight to the last against the handful of agitators (as they saw it) who sought to throw them out. All were once told by their conservatives and traditionalists that to yield was unthinkable. All changed course and withdrew. All gained from the decision. All would have invited endless sorrow and even disaster had they heeded the counsel of those who urged staying on—who wanted a military solution. Individuals can also cut their losses as, hopefully, more and more of the past supporters of this misadventure, military and civilian, will now do. To continue to invest in error is the only unforgivable mistake. So let everyone now agree on limiting losses, national and personal, in Vietnam.

Next, let us stop thinking of a solution in Vietnam as impossible. It is not at all impossible; it is only that we have so resolutely refused to proceed on any but the wrong path.

Finally, let everyone realize how we get on to a wiser

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path in Vietnam. It is by everyone possible being persuaded that there is a wiser path. Here every individual has a personal opportunity, even a personal obligation. That is to aid in this task of persuasion. The White House, Senators, Congressmen, delegates who will write the planks and select the candidates at the forthcoming party conventions, all require the attention of the concerned citizen. But so do one's friends, neighbors, fellow-workers, fellow-church-members, fellow-voters. When a majority of our people realize that there is a better course in Vietnam, we can be dead certain that the politicians will not be far behind.

Every sensible American wants out

NOW—a carefully reasoned, tough-minded plan for U.S. action
that does not depend on the consent
of the Viet Cong.

**WHEN THE MAJORITY OF OUR
PEOPLE REALIZE THAT THERE'S
A BETTER COURSE, THE POLITICIANS
WILL NOT BE FAR BEHIND**

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